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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to show that the country's dualistic views between perceived morals and practiced morals have confused youth to the point they have difficulty telling right from wrong. The paper advocates that schools should take a more active role in moral education before that role is thrust upon them by a decaying family structure. Several examples of what is perceived as the dualistic views in society are presented, along with suggestions for implementation of a strong moral education program in the schools. (EH)

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PURDUE UNIVERSITY

LIVIN' ON THE EDGE:

A LOOK AT THE NEED FOR MORAL EDUCATION

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER

BY

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WEST LAFAYETTE, IN.

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The secular rock group Aerosmith makes a very astute observation on today's society when it sings: "There's something wrong with the world today, I don't know what it is. Something wrong with our eyes. We're seeing things in a different way and God knows it ain't his. It sure ain't no surprise; we're living on the edge" (Tyler, Perry, and Hudson 1993, 30). The question is, what is this 'something' that is wrong? I would suggest that one of the major contributors to our current social problems is the gap between what our society perceives as its moral foundation versus what morals it practices.

For this paper, I propose that morals, values, and ethics be grouped together under one heading that I will call morals or moral values. Greer and Ryan (1989, 26) define morals as principles or ideals about which we feel strongly and which direct our behavior about right and wrong. They believe that these morals are the system of thought a person refers to when encountering a cultural problem. Greer and Ryan go on to say that our democratic form of government is founded on a group of perceived morals that are believed to define basic rights and wrongs.

Perception is the key to morals. It doesn't matter if that perception is founded on religion, law, or faith; the perception is the foundation to the moral, and these morals are the cornerstone to our democratic society. Durkeim states that without a clear moral code, our society may not survive. To act morally is to act in terms of the collective interest of society (Wilson 1973, xii). Therefore, it is vital that we help our children critically evaluate the moral codes our society exhibits. They will then be able to develop and follow a clearly perceived moral code that is in the best interests of society.

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Unfortunately, our children's perceptions of right and wrong are being confused because our country practices a dualism in its moral code. What this country says it perceives as morally right or wrong is not what we see being put into practice, and this could jeopardize our society. This paper will attempt to show that our country's dualistic views between perceived morals and practiced morals have confused our youth to the point that they have difficulty telling right from wrong. Because of this, we now live in a country that has become morally unsound. This moral decay has a large impact on education because it directly affects the students being taught in our schools and their attitudes toward learning, work, and each other. If our children can not tell right from wrong because the adults have continued to confuse them, then they are destined to live in a society that is much worse than our current one. Do we not owe it to our children to provide them the opportunity to have a better society than we have? It is therefore very important for us as a society to find a way to reduce this dualism so our youth have the chance to build a better place to live. We need to get the parents of these students more involved in teaching their children moral values. We also need to find a way to help students critically evaluate all the conflicting signals they receive on what is right a 1 wrong.

With the continued decay of our society's family structures, it has become apparent that society expects schools to become the surrogate families for our children. At one time, the schools function was to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Now, schools are supplying students with meals, books, supplies, and clothing. They are also teaching sex education, personal hygiene, and drivers education. All of these have

traditionally fallen under the role of the family, but because the family seems to be failing, the schools are now expected to pick up the slack (Heavilon 1995).

Once again, our society has recognized that the family system is failing. It is not developing proper morals in its children. It will not be long until the schools are again expected to take on this responsibility as well. I believe that, for once, the schools are beginning to help deal with this problem before it is thrown on them. The schools need to take an even more active role in teaching morals to the children. They must also help to re-involve parents in this process. Schools would be more successful if they could find a better approach to teaching morals. After looking at the problem of moral dualism, this paper will analyze three possible ways for educators and parents to reduce this moral dualism while teaching morals; direct approach, indirect approach, and a combination approach.

Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between strong moral instruction and success in school (Hanson and Ginsburg 1988, 334-361). This would suggest that it is important for our society to teach its young people what is morally right and wrong. Our country does recognize certain behaviors as good and others as bad. For instance, this country frowns on drug use, suicide, homicide, alcohol abuse, out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy, violence, stealing, and cheating, to name a few. The fact that our culture defines these areas as good or bad makes them cultural morals, and these morals are often used to measure the quality of the society's individuals. It then stands to reason that we should be teaching our youth these cultural morals. However, it is not difficult to find articles that refer to the decline of these moral standards in this society's children. Gang rape, date rape, violence, cheating, stealing, suicide, homicide and drug

abuse are all on the increase in today's students and society (McQuaide and Pliska 1993-94, 16; Thomas and Roberts 1994, 33; Wynne 1988, 425). London (1987, 667-673) gives some statistics concerning our society, including:

- Divorce has more than doubled per capita since 1960.
- 40% of teenagers have had sexual intercourse.
- The average age for the first sexual experience is 16.
- 50% to 75% of all teenage girls that gave birth in 1982 were unwed.
- 715,000 children were born to unwed mothers in 1982 alone.
- More than one million cases of child abuse were reported in 1982.
- More than 30% of children in grades 10 through 12 reported that they had been drunk six or more times in the past year.
- Suicide has risen 300% in the last 25 years.

Clearly, the moral ideals of our society are not showing up in our young people. Most Americans would agree with Aerosmith that there is something wrong with our world today. There is an obvious gap between what our society perceives as right and wrong and what is being practiced as right and wrong. Why do we have this gap, and why does it show up so strongly in our young people?

One thing that contributes to the gap between perceived and practiced morals is the fact that our country practices numerous moral dualisms. Webster defines dualism as a condition in which any system, in this case our moral system, is founded on a double principle. For instance, our culture says it's not winning or losing that counts, it's how you play the game. This is a strong moral issue that says fair play is more important than winning. This seems simple enough, but this is not the message being portrayed in an article that appeared in the Lafayette Journal and Courier on February 24, 1995 by Ann Landers. It describes a boy in Texas that was showing a pig at his county fair. The pig was under weight when the boy first weighed it in. While his FFA advisor and several

other adults looked on, the boy forced water down the hog's throat in order to add weight to the pig. The pig died. What moral value was taught to this young man-- that fair play is what is important or that winning justifies everything?

Another example of dualism is seen in the concept of stealing. Parents tell their kids that stealing is wrong and yet these same parents cheat on their income taxes or help themselves to company office supplies. The perceived moral of "do not steal", seems to be outweighed by the practiced moral of "stealing is only wrong if you get caught". These dual standards for morals create confusion for our young people. It's no wonder teachers have a hard time trusting their students.

Many subgroups also exist in our society and each subgroup interprets our moral heritage in a number of different ways. For instance, being a productive individual is considered to be a strong moral value in our society. Yet, different groups have different ways of creating these productive individuals and sometimes, these ways are in conflict with each other, thus causing confusion. For example, when a school principle tried to implement a cognitive psychology program designed to improve student self image and productivity, he faced extreme opposition from the Christian fundamentalists in his community. He found that his solution for creating positive attitudes in students was in conflict with the Christian belief that all people are sinners and their hope is in Jesus Christ alone (Marzano 1993-94, 6-11). Both sides wanted students to have positive attitudes about themselves so they could be productive members of our society. However, both sides had opposing views on how to get to that moral level.

Different socio-economic groups can also display different moral values. Mehan (1992, 1-17) discovered that different socio-economic cultures all hold a moral value for

success. The difference is how success is defined. Children of middle class families are provided the opportunity to read good books, interact with parents, visit museums, attend concerts, and, in general, are given the opportunity to do better than their parents did. That is the definition of success for this group. On the other hand, parents from low socio-economic cultures have less time to spend with their children. They seemed to define success as having children who were as productive as themselves, held similar jobs, completed similar levels of education, and lived at similar levels of economic status.

Both of these examples begin to show just how many moral interpretations there are, and that students are caught in the middle trying to sort out which set of morals are correct. Should they listen to mom and dad, teachers, television, church, or peers? This confusion can often lead students to choosing a set of morals that is easy to change to fit the circumstances. In other words, their morals become whatever allows them to justify their actions. This seems to create a very dangerous situation. It would mean that our moral base is, and will continue to become, even more fragmented. Eventually this fragmentation could cause a break down of the entire society. .If everyone does what feels good to them without consideration of how it effects others, it will probably lead to anarchy.

Because children have not had time to experience life and choose a set of morals to live by, they are exceptionally vulnerable to mixed signals. In the past, it has always been the responsibility of the parents to instill morals into their children. The parents would often rely on the community and the church to help with this process. Take for instance, the study done by Gadsden (1993, 352-367) of a small African-American community in the south. Gadsden discovered that education and literacy were moral expectations of the

children in the community. The adults expected the schools to teach the children literacy, but education was learned through understanding the community, and a sense of cultural identity. The study found family, culture and religion to be the most important elements in developing moral character in the young people. This supports the idea that morals are developed in the home. Unfortunately, parents are no longer playing as vital a role in our children's development of right and wrong. Kilpatrick (1992, 245-250) discusses how American parents do not seem to have as much desire to have children as they once did. He polled 10,000 parents and asked if they had it to do all over again, would they still have children? He reported that out of 10,000 parents polled, 70% said they would not. He argues that American parents simply no longer want the responsibility of raising moral children. He also reports that on the average, American parents spend less than fifteen minutes a week in serious discussion with their children.

With dualistic viewpoints on morals bombarding our kids from all sides, multiple views on how to accomplish moral development, and parents taking a back seat in the moral development of their children, it is no wonder that the moral gap in our society is most apparent in our young people. Somehow, we as a society must narrow the gap between our perceived moral standards and our practiced morals. If we do not, there is a good chance that our societies moral standards will continue to decline. The easy answer is to lower our moral standards and sell our children out. However, this does not seem to be an appropriate solution to me because it will only result in a moral downward spiral. Each generation would be teaching lower and lower standards to the next. Greer and Ryan (1989,26) and Durkheim (Wilson 1973, xii) agree that without morals, our society will be unable to continue

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So how do we reduce this confusion in our young people? It would seem that we need to have parents more involved in their children's moral development, and we need to find a way to help our children sort out the multiple views of morals through more effective methods of teaching, both in the classroom and the home.

Greer and Ryan (1989, 27) support the need for parents to play the main role in developing moral character in our children. They state that parents have the greater responsibility and typically the greater concern. Unfortunately, parents do not always seem to agree. Lickona (1988,36-38) suggests that it is the schools responsibility to get the parents involved in their children's moral development. He stresses the need for the schools and parents to agree on basic morals to be taught. Morals like hard work, honesty, and fairness should be defined to help avoid dualisms as much as possible. He believes that parents should be put in school support groups designed to help parents and teachers with different moral ideals evaluate and update the moral codes taught to the students at home and in the schools. Most important, he stresses the need for teachers and parents to be parallel in their instruction of students. Many of the other articles that I researched throughout this project supported the need for parent involvement. All of these articles recommend defining moral objectives based on the *community's* moral code. This can be accomplished through a community advisory committee or support group set up to help the teacher and parents understand which moral standards should be set. The research did not suggest setting up special classes just to teach moral concepts, instead it suggests emphasizing the need to teach morals through everyday life. Who better to teach about everyday life than the parents? The literature also stresses the need for teachers and parents to model the moral values that they are teaching, helping to eliminate dualism

(Greer and Ryan 1989, 26-28; Kilpatrick 1992; Streshly and Schapps 1988, 31-33; Thomas and Roberts 1994, 33-35; Wynne 1988, 424-426).

In the past, and in some cases in the present, the educational system has tried to incorporate two basic styles of teaching moral education in the classroom. Benninga (1988, 416) describes these two methods as direct approach and indirect approach. Both methods continue to be used today, but both had a more dominant time in history. Since the moral confusion in our children appears to be growing, it is safe to assume that neither of these methods has proven to be very successful. Yet, both have some useful basic ideas.

Benninga (1988, 416) describes direct approach as an attempt to alter the behavior of students in order to push forward a specific set of moral values. This approach requires teachers to specifically define the moral standards that will be acceptable. Students are informed of what these standards are and are told the consequences of ignoring them. These consequences usually take the form of direct punishment or negative results for the students. For instance, the use of drugs on college campuses is often considered to be immoral. If a college wished to stress this point and teach its students not to use drugs in a direct approach format, it would spell out to students that the use of drugs would be unacceptable. It would continue by defining the specific consequences the students should expect as a result of the use of drugs. These consequences may include direct punishment from the school, or negative effects on the user's life and body. Often, this approach utilizes the entire curriculum to help push these moral standards onto the students. For instance, not only were the moral values of hard work and love of country pushed forward by the teacher, they were also pushed by readings like "The Three Little Pigs" and "The

Man Without a Country". Direct teacher and curriculum influence is the key to this method.

Ryan (1986, 228) adds that this form of moral education was by far the dominant type up through the 1950's. Teachers were expected to reflect the moral code of their community by rewarding students for "proper moral behavior" and punishing them for "improper moral behavior". There are some obvious benefits noted by Ryan to this approach. Confusion was brought to a minimum because teachers taught the moral code of the community. This meant that the morals being taught at home were reinforced by the schools and visa versa. Confusion was also reduced because students were not asked to think about what was right and what was wrong, they were simply told. This approach also provided a strong moral foundation for students to draw upon throughout their lives.

Ryan also noted some disadvantages to this approach. While telling students what is right and wrong does save confusion, it does not promote thought. Students are asked to accept that something is wrong simply because their parents or teachers tell them so. For instance, when little Johnny is going around the play ground beating up everyone who is smaller than he, the teacher tells him that it is wrong. His response is, "Why?, They're to small to hurt me back." The teacher will often reply, "It is wrong because I say it is wrong." Where is the foundation to this statement? It won't take Johnny long to figure out that the response "Because I say so" can justify any position. This direct approach does not provide the students with a way of analyzing what is right and wrong.

There is an interesting side note to this approach. Religion is often used to help support the direct approach to moral education. Religion supplies an omnipotent being(s) that defines these rights and wrongs. So now when Johnny says, "Why?" the response is,

"Because **God** says it is wrong." Children that have been brought up in a religious faith have a hard time arguing with God. Simonds (1994, 12) argues that religion, specifically the Christian religion, is the perfect way to bring our moral education back on line. He argues that this country was founded on Christian principles and that the Bible is the only true way of defining right from wrong. If our country chooses to accept this idea, the dualism between the perceived morals and practiced morals may very well narrow. People would have a form of absolute rights and wrongs. Unfortunately, the days when this country's people had similar religious backgrounds are well in the past. Now there is a wide variety of accepted religious beliefs and a large portion of the population has no religious beliefs at all. This makes it very doubtful that this country will ever choose to all follow a specific religion, let alone a specific *Christian* religion.

Dictating what is right and what is wrong is certainly one way of limiting confusion for students. However, dictating right and wrong and eliminating thought does not seem to fit the philosophy of education put forth by Shermis (1995(?),31) when he states that the philosophy of education should deal more with getting students to question the process of learning. In other words, as teachers, it is very important that we help students think through the process of determining what is right and wrong.

The 1960's and 70's brought about a change in education that attempted to do just this. The approach that was used is called indirect approach to teaching moral education. Benninga (1988, 415) describes two types of indirect moral education. The first deals with values clarification and seeks to help students clarify what their lives are for and what is worth working for. Students are presented with moral dilemmas and asked to respond to them. This procedure is designed to help students define their own moral values, not

the values of their parents, communities, or culture. Teachers strived to engaged students in analyzing their moral values about war, family, and the whole range of student relationships. Ryan (1986, 230) looks at the positives of this method. He states that students enjoy these activities because it allows them to discuss the topics without having to study what the culture had already learned about them. The technique is easy to learn and requires little preparation from the teachers. It was, at first, thought that these techniques were having very positive outcomes and values clarification became one of the primary ways of battling the "values crisis" of the sixties and seventies.

Benninga (1988, 415) states some of the negatives of values clarification. It often offends the community's moral standards, undermines accepted values, has no search for group consensus, fails to stress truth and right behavior, and allows students to base their moral system on personal preference. Overall, values clarification has no foundation and only adds to the confusion our young people are experiencing. It was also discovered that this technique was not resulting in a substantial change in moral behavior.

Benninga (1988, 415) identifies a second type of indirect approach to moral education called cognitive-developmental approach to moral education. This approach is based on Lawrence Kolberg's work. Kolberg believes that morality is a set of rational principles that allows people to make judgments on how to behave. He believes that the primary principle is justice, or a belief that everyone has worth and dignity. He outlined six stages of moral development that people go through as they age. By presenting questions and problems, teachers can determine what stage of moral development a student is in. The teacher can then push a child to move to the next level by asking questions at that level (Dembo 1994, 214; Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg 1989, 99). This

approach again has the teacher playing a neutral role and helping the students to keep the discussions on course. This approach is designed to make students think through their moral attitudes and strive to move to higher stages of moral development. Peters (1975, 678) points out that Kohlberg does not take into account whose definition of morality is being pushed forward, nor does he offer solutions for strengthening people who are unable to move past the third or fourth stage. He also criticizes Kohlberg for not showing how to strengthen people's moral emotions like guilt, concern for others, or remorse. Peters would also like to see Kohlberg take the students "will" into account.

While the indirect approach to moral development does seem to help students analyze their moral values and promotes thinking, it has not proven that it changes moral behavior (Dembo 1994, 218). Still, the direct approach seems to change behavior; after all, up until 1963, scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests had continued to rise. When the indirect approach came on to the scene, the test scores dropped for 18 straight years (Ryan 1986, 229). Unfortunately, the direct approach does not promote thought from its students, which goes against the philosophy of education. It would seem that each of these approaches has a positive and a negative effect on moral education. Perhaps it is time to find a way to combine them. This new method will be referred to as the combination approach to moral education and is designed to couple the positive aspect of thought analysis from the indirect approach with the moral behavior change from the direct approach. I will attempt to give examples of how it can be used in an agricultural education class through an intra-curricular course called the FFA.

While it is obvious that we as teachers, parents, and community members must become involved in helping our students to develop a critical thinking ability, it has

become equally obvious that we must also help them overcome the moral confusion our society has caused them. I believe that the first priority is to help our students sort out this confusing issue of what is right and what is wrong. A direct approach to this problem would be the most effective way of helping our students develop a moral code (Benninga 1988, 416; Ryan 1986, 229; Ryan and Greer 1989, 26)). Establishing a small core of morals that are acceptable to parents, community, teachers, and students would need to be the first step. In order to find this core of acceptable morals, it is vital that the parents and community get involved with their schools. The FFA puts into use a community group called the Advisory Committee. This committee is comprised of a cross section of the community, parents, teachers, students, and administration (Frick, Stump, and Wilson 1995, 4). As the teacher, it is a good idea to prepare a list of possible morals that are important for the students to have as a base. The National FFA Organization has already identified a Code of Ethics that include:

- Showing respect for the rights of others.
- Being honest and not taking advantage of others.
- Respecting the property of others.
- Refraining from loud boisterous talk, swearing and other unbecoming conduct.
- Being a good sport.
- Showing responsibility.
- Working hard and putting forth the best effort.
- Serving others (National FFA Organization 1993, 12).

This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor is it a list that may be accepted by the whole committee, but it does give the committee a feel for where the teacher is coming from. There is nothing wrong with teaching religious morals or non religious morals if that is

what the community agrees upon. It is vital to find a list of morals that the whole group can agree on. This will be the base from which the direct approach will be taught.

Once the Advisory Committee has established what the moral code will consist of, it will be important to identify how this code will be implemented. Kohn (1991, 496) identifies several ways that these morals can be emphasized. First, punishing students that do not abide by these morals will most certainly begin to help the students put the morals into practice. Second, reward the students when the morals are shown. Third, encourage commitment to morals, or help students to see the reasons behind having these codes. Lastly, encouraging the group's commitment to morals, or showing the whole group how to help each other, can be an effective way of promoting the morals. Kohn also stresses the need for the teachers, parents, and community to demonstrate these morals in a consistent manner. This again, will help reduce the dualisms in moral education.

If we were to stop here, we would have accomplished one major task: a good learning environment that promotes morals. We would have also provided the students with a moral base from which to draw-- a base that should match the community's moral code. This is an excellent beginning; yet, we as teachers are called to do more than that. We are called to help students think and reason their way through these morals. We are to help the students find a set of morals that they can feel comfortable with. The moral base that we began with is certainly not all inclusive. It is just a foundation. For instance, the moral listed above about "serving others" does not tell us who those "others" are. There is a need for some indirect approach as well.

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Shermis (1970, 743) describes a process of thought motivation called reflective inquiry. Reflective inquiry is described as a process of decision-making within our sociopolitical framework. This framework has dictated that everyone is called upon either to make the rules, or morals, which govern them, or select someone to do so for them. The direct approach shows the process of having someone else select the rules to govern students, but Shermis contends that it is also important for the students to select for themselves. He describes decision-making as a process of choosing between what will do more good (or less bad), not just distinguishing between right and wrong. An example of this that relates to agriculture class is the use of pesticides. Is it morally right to use them? From one viewpoint, the pesticides can cause pollution of the environment. From another viewpoint, the pesticides can help produce more food. Which is right? They both are. Reflective-inquiry allows students to use the base of morals provided in the direct approach to practice making decisions about significant social problems and help develop the skills needed in defining what those social problems are. This method can be used in the classroom and can tie directly to the core morals that were developed in the direct approach. Agriculture faces a wide range of moral dilemmas, all of which can be used to provide students with practice in reflective-inquiry. The National FFA puts out a program called Made for Excellence (National FFA Organization 1991) specifically designed to use the idea of reflective-inquiry. It stresses the need to identify personal values and morals, how to distinguish right from wrong, and gives a wide range of practice situations to help students asses their responses and promote thinking.

In this paper, FFA was used as a model to help demonstrate the combination approach to moral education. It can however, be transferred to a wide range of other course work and subject areas.

It has become obvious that the gap between our societies perceived moral standard and practiced moral standard is quite wide. This dualism seems to be caused from our nations diverse backgrounds and definitions of right and wrong along with the lack of parental support and poor teaching methods in our schools. This appears to be causing our children confusion, which in turn, seems to be making it difficult for them to differentiate between right and wrong. Many believe that without the ability to tell right from wrong, a democratic society will quickly fall. Our attempts to this point to narrow the moral gap do not seem to be working. The parental and community support of the schools seems to be shaky at best. Meanwhile the schools have found that the direct approach to moral education is lacking in the development of student thinking abilities. On the other hand, the indirect approach seems to be forcing students to think, but does not have a foundation from which the students can draw. This results in a "if it feels good" attitude. A combination of the direct and indirect approach shows some promise and may be worth a try. Vital to the success of this approach is getting the community to support a core moral code. The teacher needs to get the parents and community involved in the students moral education and then all three must work together to help the students learn this moral code. This code can then provide the foundation that the indirect method was lacking. This will allow the teacher to implement reflective-inquiry to help students develop skills in identify moral issues and choosing between moral outcomes. Perhaps it is

time to try this new method, since the old methods do not appear to be working. Why not try it now, before we find ourselves falling over "the edge"?

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